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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000709

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KPAQ TS

SUBJECT: TUNISIA: PRO-GOVERNMENT MEDIA PLAY UP (AND TAKE LIBERTIES WITH) USG MEETINGS

REF: TUNIS 694 (NOTAL)

Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Foreign Minister Abdallah's encounters in New York with senior USG officials last week, and even his very brief exchange and handshake with President Obama at the UNSYG's lunch, have been prominently featured in the Tunisian pro-government media. On September 25, several pro-government dailies ran a large above-the-fold headline featuring side-by-side photos of Presidents Obama and Ben Ali and reporting President Obama's expression of "esteem" (alt. translation, "appreciation") for President Ben Ali.

¶2. (SBU) Also on September 25, pro-government papers noted the Foreign Minister's bilaterals with Senator Mitchell and Assistant Secretary Feltman, quoting the latter as saying he was "impressed" with Tunisia's progress in social, economic and political fields, and noting that Middle East peace was a key topic of their discussion.

¶3. (SBU) Two (French language) pro-government papers followed up on September 27 with a report quoting Senator Mitchell, during his meeting with Foreign Minister Abdallah, as saying the "United States is counting on the support of President Ben Ali in the relaunch of the peace process."

¶4. (C) Comment: The tone and emphasis of the pro-government media's coverage, for domestic consumption, is clearly intended to build up Ben Ali's stature and imply a U.S. endorsement, coming as Ben Ali's (non-competitive) reelection campaign heats up (reftel). At the same time, the reports suggest at least the possibility of leveraging the Tunisian Government's craving for attention and approval into more proactive role for Tunisia in the MEPP. End comment.

GRAY